

A
Q
U
E
S
T
I
O
N

O
F

M
O
D
E
R
N
I
T
Y

**The Figure
in American
Sculpture**

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

February 26–April 30, 1995



SCULPTURE AS A MODERN ART FORM in the United States emerged at the turn of the century and evolved during the next four decades in response to the country's changing cultural, social, and political conditions. Americans abandoned the production of public monuments and formal portraits to create sculpture of a highly personal and expressive nature.

All the sculptors in this exhibition explored new themes, styles, and sources of inspiration while retaining the human figure as their principal motif. They have been neglected by history because critics and scholars since World War II have defined modernism as pure abstraction. However, in the early twentieth-century modernism was more broadly interpreted as a spirit of inventiveness and openness.

Sculpture as a profession during this period became less elitist. Massive immigration, urbanization, and other social developments encouraged women, African Americans, and other previously marginalized groups to create art. While past exhibitions have isolated these artists according to race, ethnic group, and gender, *The Figure in American Sculpture* is the first to place them within the mainstream.

The Influence of Rodin

The French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) rejected the traditional notion that sculpture had to be commemorative or educational. Upholding the primacy of the personal realm, he used the nude to explore themes of contemplation, emotional turmoil, love, and sexuality. Americans began to realize his significance in the 1890s. By the time Chester Beach (1881–1956) carved his evocative marble on the subject of love and loss (fig. 1), Americans could identify Rodin as the source for Beach's sensual rendering of the nudes and juxtaposition of highly polished and rough stone surfaces. American artists enthusiastically adopted Rodin's practice of exploiting the unique qualities of his materials and began to treat bronze as a rippling, reflective surface and to suggest that stone could appear soft and sensual.

Arthur Putnam (1873–1930) and Harriet Frishmuth (1880–1980) carried on Rodin's fascination with the expressive potential of the human body, focusing on the figure in motion. Later Gaston Lachaise (1882–1935) among others embraced Rodin's belief that the partial figure (often just a torso) could be as evocative as a complete body.



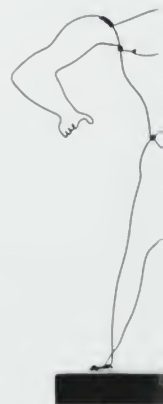
1
Chester Beach
(United States, 1881–1956)
*THE RIVER'S RETURN
TO THE SEA*
1936, marble, 14 x 45¹/₂ x
15 in. (35.6 x 115.6 x 38.1 cm).
Dr. James D. Zidell

Modern Genre

Some sculptors rejected the romanticism of Rodin's nudes, preferring genre, the depiction of the daily activities of ordinary people. The rise of American genre sculpture, like that of the contemporary Ashcan school of painting, paralleled the growth of modern cities with their attendant diversions and problems. Among the earliest genre specialists were a number of women. Their subjects ranged from aristocratic ladies at leisure depicted by Bessie Potter Vonnih (1872–1955) to playful immigrant children from New York's Lower East Side by Abastema St. Leger Eberle (1878–1942). The quintessential theme was the male urban worker. Native and immigrant artists, such as Max Kalish (1891?–1945) and Saul Baizerman (1889–1957), honored the laborer as the hero of the industrial age, thereby glorifying America in its new modern identity.

After World War I some artists turned to escapist themes, as did Alexander Calder (1898–1976) in his whimsical sculptures of circus performers (fig. 2). Genre sculpture

reached its fullest expression during the 1930s, partly fueled by the federal art projects' call for images of the common man. Artists shifted from the glorification of the working class to the raw expression of its suffering. Increasing racial strife inspired sculptures against lynching. Civil unrest in Mexico led Octavio Medelín (b. 1907) to convey the righteousness of his people's cause in *The Spirit of the Revolution*. Eventually antiwar protests appeared.



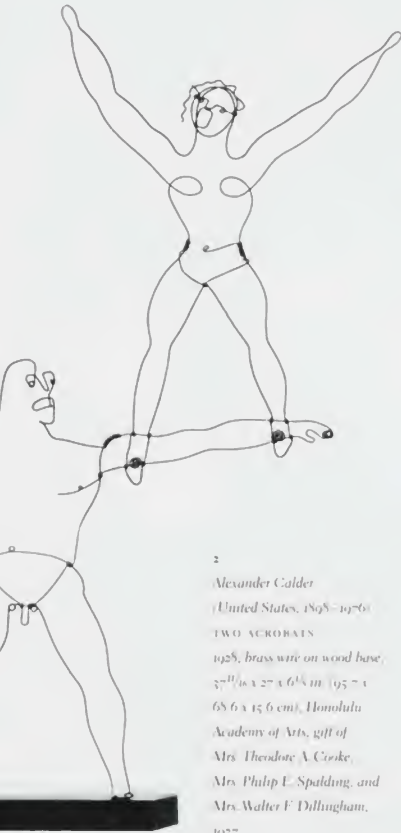
Some sculptors turned to cultures historically or geographically distant as an alternative to the increasingly technological aspect of American society. For centuries classical Greece and Rome had inspired artists desirous of reinvigorating their art with a sense of order and calm. Although twentieth-century neo-classicism included idealized portraits and representations of mythical stories, it differed in several ways from earlier revivals. Paul Manship (1885–1966) and C. Paul Jennewein (1890–1975), trained at the American Academy in Rome, preferred the angular, almost naïve art of archaic Greece to the high classical style of the Periclean age. The ancients' emphasis on purity of form did encourage more abstracted works, such as the floating torsos of Alexander Archipenko (1887–1964) and Lachaise's bulbous lounging nudes.

The most distinctive trait of modern classicism was a fascination for surface treatment. Modernists challenged the primacy of white sculpture, realizing that the Greeks had originally colored much of their statuary. Consequently, twentieth-century classicists painted their sculptures in vibrant lines and experimented with different patinas on their bronzes, as seen in the lustrous black of Jennewein's *Greek Dance* (fig. 3). The sleek surfaces and stylized, rhythmic shapes associated with modern classicism were well suited to the streamlined character of industrial design and became known when applied to interior decoration and architecture as art deco.

Archipenko, Calder, and Isamu Noguchi (1904–88) are today the best known of the early progressive sculptors. Many others, however, also explored avant-garde European styles. Yet despite a great deal of experimentation, most Americans resisted complete abstraction and the nonobjective prior to 1945.

The majority of Americans adhered to a style derived from cubism or its offshoot, futurism. John Storrs (1885–1956) most consistently demonstrated an understanding of the principles of cubism as the decomposition of objects into intersecting planes. Others reinterpreted or misinterpreted cubism. Most, such as Cesar Stea (1893–1960) in his *Man with Book*, thought it meant merely the simplification of natural forms into geometric shapes. Hard-edge, cubic figures accorded well with the machine age aesthetics of the era.

Experimentation with nontraditional media led to a questioning of the basic principles of sculpture. Archipenko modeled his surrealist *Kneeling Figure* (fig. 4) in terra-cotta, replacing solid material with holes in an unprecedented way. Calder took the concept of negative space one step further in his wire sculptures, completely contradicting the notion of sculptural solidity. Noguchi, Turkin Trajan (1887–1959), and others used industrial materials such as plastic, metal, and cement to achieve a variety of effects.



2
Alexander Calder
(United States, 1898–1976)
TWO ACROBATS
1928, brass wire on wood base,
37 1/2 (a x 27 x 6 1/4 in (95 x 68.6 x 15.6 cm), Honolulu
Academy of Arts, gift of
Mrs. Theodore A. Croke,
Mrs. Philip E. Spalding, and
Mrs. Walter F. Dillingham,
1957



3

Carl Paul Jennewein
(Germany, 1890–1978)

GREEK DANCE

1925, bronze, 20 ¹/₂ x 16 x

6 ¹/₄ in. (52.1 x 40.6 x 15.9 cm).

Los Angeles County Museum
of Art, gift of 1994 Collectors
Committee

4

Alexander Archipenko
(Russia, 1887–1964)

KNEELING FIGURE

1925, terra-cotta, 26 ¹/₂ x 11 ¹/₂ x

6 ¹/₄ in. (67.3 x 29.2 x 16.5 cm).

Hughes and Sheila Potiker



Nancy Prophet
(United States, 1890–1960)
Congolais
 1921, wood, 17 1/8 x 6 1/2 x
 8 1/8 in. (43.5 x 17.2 x
 20.5 cm), Whitney Museum
 of American Art, purchase
 Photograph: Geoffrey
 Clements



American Primitivism

The American fascination with non-Western, Native American, and folk cultures began in the 1910s as industrialization and urbanization threatened to destabilize traditional notions of identity. Primitivism (the interest of modern Western artists in tribal arts and cultures) took a somewhat different form in America than in Europe. Its practitioners were more diverse in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and gender and consequently were open to a broader range of sources than the Europeans, who focused on African and Oceanic art.

A number of Americans created sculptures of an ethnographic nature to monumentalize cultures and races that were disappearing. In *Congolais* (fig. 5) Nancy Prophet (1890–1960) probed the spirit of the African warrior. Works by West Coast artists Beniamino Bufano (c. 1898–1970), Allan Clark (1896–1950), and Jacques Schnier (1898–1988) were informed by extended trips to Asia. Eugenie Shoniard (1886–1978) searched closer to home—at the Indian pueblos of New Mexico—while William Artis (1914–77) and Sargent Johnson (1887–1967) celebrated the beauty and dignity of members of their own African American communities.

Many Americans were influenced by primitive aesthetics, that is, the art of unframed artisans. Elie Nadelman (1882–1946) was inspired by the folk art he collected. The technique of direct carving had the greatest impact because executing one's own sculpture by hand instead of supervising a team of assistants stimulated greater personal expression



and immediacy. The first American primitives hewed wood, carving totemic sculptures, such as *The Lindbergh Family* (fig. 6) by Charm Gross (1904–91), which recall African fetish objects. By the late 1920s and 1930s artists chiseled in stone and looked also to Mesoamerica, ancient Egypt, and other sources for inspiration. John Flammagan (1895–1942) and younger artists, such as Cleo Hartwig (1907–88), retained the massive, blocky quality of the original stone and communicated a primordial sense of permanence that foreshadowed the abstract expressionist art of the succeeding era.

6
Charm Gross
 (Austria-Hungary, 1904–91)
 THE LINDBERGH FAMILY
 1932, golden-streaked wood;
Charles Lindbergh (left)
 60 x 11 x 6 1/2 in.; 150 x 6 x 2 1/2 in.
 x 16.5 cm.; *Anna Lindbergh*
 69 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 5 1/2 in.; 102.6 x
 17.7 x 14 cm.; *Mimi Gross*, *The*
Remise © Charm Gross
 Foundation, New York City
 Photograph: Joseph Cosca, Jr.

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It was made possible by a generous grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. Additional support was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department. Transportation was provided by United Airlines.

Education programs are supported in part by a grant from the California Arts Council.

Text prepared by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. A catalogue of the exhibition is available for purchase in the museum shop.

Copyright 1995 by Museum Associates, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All rights reserved.



This exhibition is one of four that together comprise the American Festival, which celebrates artistic achievement in the United States of America. The festival runs March 12–April 30, 1995.

YOU ARE INVITED TO JOIN THE MUSEUM

\$55 Active members receive:

- Unlimited free admission for two adults and your children under 18 to the entire museum (single members may bring 1 guest for free)
- Members preview days and free admission for special exhibitions
- A subscription to *At the Museum*, our members' magazine
- Discounts at our museum shops and on admissions to our films, concerts, lectures, and classes
- Free docent tours of selected special exhibitions and our permanent collection
- Art Rental Gallery privileges
- The opportunity to join LACMA Muse, a social, educational, and cultural group for members in their twenties, thirties, and forties
- The opportunity to join our museum councils

(*\$51.84 of your contribution is tax deductible*)

\$90 Contributing members receive:

- All Active member benefits
- One exhibition or permanent collection catalogue selected especially for you by LACMA

(*\$51.97 of your contribution is tax deductible*)

\$150 Patron members receive:

- All Contributing member benefits
- Invitations to three evening preview receptions for special exhibitions
- Reciprocal membership privileges at twenty-one major art museums around the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Art Institute of Chicago

(*\$118.73 of your contribution is tax deductible*)

For information on other levels of membership contact the membership office at (213) 857-6151

Enclosed is my membership contribution of:

- ☐ Active: \$55
☐ Contributing: \$90
☐ Patron: \$150

Please indicate

- ☐ new membership
☐ renewal membership

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY

STATE

ZIP CODE

PHONE (HOME/BUSINESS)

MEMBERSHIP ID (IF APPLICABLE)

Payment

- ☐ Check (payable to LACMA)
☐ Charge inv: ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard ☐ American Express

ACCOUNT NUMBER

EXPIRATION DATE

NAME AS IT APPEARS ON CARD

SIGNATURE

Return application to the membership and information desk on the Times Mirror Central Court or mail to:

Membership Office
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
5905 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90036